Equations

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I. Thesis

#1

Here's my equation: sex is more human than everything else. Let me put sex to the left of me and you to the right of me. In the interstices between me and sex, I have achieved my greatest consonance with humanity. In the interstices between me and you, I can (hopefully) give you a greater consonance with humanity, just by showing you the seams, the zippers, the ruffles, the cuffs, all the accoutrements that dress us up to be naked, in a text with its own nakedness. If I start with Marie, it is to show you her humanity so that you know why this was, for both of us, a fortunate fall. Marie had pale flesh. I am watching her; she is sitting on the little grass upwards-going slope behind the White Lodge, sipping a bottle of beer. Her straight, shoulder length black hair is parted in the middle. Then, a big open field with a peninsula of woods behind it; we're in the woods, making out. She wants to lie down amid the ferns, twigs, dirt, grass, and have it off. She's a teenager and I'm 22 and I'm freaked out, can't do it. So that I learn two kinds of hungriness can't always converge. Our bodies are slaves to different masters: duty, propriety to the right of us, impetuosity, passions to the left. When two hungers meet, they must negotiate. My hands go up her sleeveless, multi-colored blouse, but I'm going down the slope towards duty and right action.

#2

When hungers meet in the middle, who wins? I held onto the top of my black mattress for leverage, Marie beneath me. Black mattress feels like a black Sabbath with this teenage princess on it, who has brought us hydrochloride pot to smoke. It's a cloudy afternoon in late November. To the right of us is the empty red fuzz coat with black buttons Marie likes to wear. To the left of us is the sense that you can't get what you want without breaking rules. I am consonant with the knowledge that morality is an ill-fitting glove for most mortals. The rightness of this is the rightness of me going down for the first time, thus expunging everything in my system that does not want to serve Marie. Intoxication traces its way around us and if I have fallen (and I know that I have) it is because what the preachers will tell you leaves too much out. As there is no bed (just the black mattress) no one in the house hears the pounding. She offers to take my streams, but I must not. It is in her nature to want the promise of motherhood hidden in the folds of her body. So our deepest hunger remains unsatisfied. Marie is naked except for the series of necklaces she likes to wear, and as she sits astride me they make little jingling noises that tell a tale of bitter bliss.

#3

Time and sex: sex chronology is not linear. Sex and time are both conversant with strange leaps. It is the first day of the first class I will ever teach. Julie looks at me with big round black eyes, soulfully. She has long wavy black hair and her looks are dark, foreboding. We often want what wants us; Julie makes a habit of following me, from the classroom to the subway, from the subway to the Last Drop. As a student, she's haphazard. What she teaches me is that when someone follows you, they can make you follow them; on the walk home from the Drop, I realize my mind is following her, into her apartment, onto her bed, underneath the sheets, underneath her folds, into her little stomach. But I can't. So I let her follow me, knowing that this will lead (eventually) to a culminating moment. My hunger is for continuance. Julie wants the thrill of picking up a hot potato and dropping it back into the pot. But these early weeks are all titillation, so that every soulful look to me is the countenance of continuance, has endurance written into it. Is this my wife? Marriages have been initiated in stranger fashions. Julie is as pale as Marie, but much flintier, so I know strife will be a feature of my daily existence, after we are married. I think this as I stand before the class, discoursing on Chaucer, gazing at this little wife of Bath.

#4

The semester is over, almost. I am making a pact with Satan to get away with this. It is all fine and feisty as I bite the bullet, walk the knife edge, get in touch with my renegade parts. But I never lose sight of the hunger for permanence, which is by no means Julie's. Her hunger is just to have what cannot be had, so that she can be a special person. Two hungers collide into nakedness, and neither seems to care that they don't coalesce. We are separate via our separate hungers, and human in our desperate need to pursue them, singularly, and only marginally together. Her apartment is a mess, but with high ceilings, who cares? So we climb into our bed of separate hungers and square off. I learn nothing because I do not see what her hunger is. I think she's just like me. Of course, she wants what I want. Of course, she thinks, he wants what I want, to do something to make himself a special person. What neither knows is that we're both not special, we are both (and more than we realize), lusterless in our separate lusts. There is no innocence lost because raw hungers remain innocent until proven otherwise. You can pound away a hunger, but each thrust by no means puts you deeper into the other person. You move deeper into privations of private passions, unexpressed. But Julie looks so young and callow that I don't notice these things. This, I think, is the beginning; but Julie has already become a special person, and wants a way out. We both sleep topless in the May heat.

#5

Something holds Julie back so that there can't be too much of this. While I am with her, she controls everything, from my sensations to my destiny. She can bite me off, permanently cripple me, or please me if she wants. As master, she decides how much hunger she will or will not assuage. She uses her hands as well as her mouth, doing little twists like she's learned to do from Internet porn. It's delicious, my legs shake from the unbearable nature of the sensations. The problem is, she then freezes, which means she is deliberately effacing my most overwhelming pulses. So I come in her frozen, static mouth, with a sense of intense anti-climax, and I am too bashful to instruct her as to how to do this properly. Yet any woman who brings me to this must be a darling and an angel. Julie, this darling angel, stands on the threshold of womanhood, and her hunger is merely to control. There is no sense of service, and since we are in my apartment there is no sense of comfort for her. What she wants to take home with her is a sense of having bested me. As she gazes at my closed eyes and opened mouth, there is (I imagine now) a sense of bitterly held contempt for my weakness, my humanity. We never fuse our different stupidities, so that I see no depths in those rounded eyes of jet, and she knows that she has now gotten what she wants from me; there is no more specialness.

#6

Then, there are those happy, halcyon times (and such times do exist) in which all the parts fit, the striations interlock in such a way that no one gets ploughed over, no one bested, no hungers perpetuated. Little Mindy works retail with me. There is something doll-like about her, but she has Puerto Rican roots and olive skin, black hair either frizzed or smoothed down on top of her head. We establish a bond that has both elements of tightness and looseness. So when she starts dropping by my apartment, it is with foreknowledge in her hunger (which I do not quite realize) that sex is very much on the menu. Of course, as all fine young ladies do, she holds most of the cards. But as we sit on my blue, rather ratty old couch, smoking not-very-potent weed and listening to the Yeah Yeah Yeahs, I jolt towards her, realizing that her energy is sucking me in. She is so small and delicate that I feel transgressive just touching her, but, more importantly, our hungers meet in the middle, so that nothing is withheld, everything coalesces: we are a successful narrative.

#7

Mindy, like Marie, wants my streams. The difference is that this has nothing to do with eventual parturition. Mindy loves thrill seeking and joyrides; she wants to experience things fully; she has the temperament of an artist. So that our sex is never quite perfect; I pull out, thinking prudent thoughts. Mindy is left serviced but undernourished. There are strange gaps in her mind; it doesn't occur to Mindy what the disasters of unwanted pregnancies amount to. I know (I am thirty, she is nineteen) that a stream from me will undo our successful narrative. The narrative maintains an edge of longing based on calculations I do that she will not. And the spaces between our major encounters are filled with text messages, because cell phones are now part of everyone's relationship equations. Cell phones are a flush; they break up narratives into crumbs. Fortunately, both Mindy and I know how to employ cell phones and text messages in successful ways. They are a sauce on an entrée. But as successful as our narrative is, Mindy is left hankering after an innocence that I don't have. She wants the wild looseness I have left behind to make my way in the world. I have high art consonance and a stern disposition; my publishing life is serious and on the up and up; the bar crawls, bashes, and orgies of my past have been left behind. Our time together is, must be, short: I hunger too much for things she doesn't understand yet, she hungers for behaviors I've abandoned.

#8

Sex and destiny— Jean is on top of me. She has straight, shoulder-length blonde hair parted on one side; her small, dainty mouth pouts. She is doing some kind of clench with her moves; she wants my streams. She wants them randomly, because she wants to be a mother; it's a role to play. Everyone, I learn, wants a role to play. Because the material circumstances are not promising, because I have prudent thoughts, I pull out and away from her. It is the spring of my twenty-fourth year; she's nineteen. Nevertheless, I have experienced something ethereal; other worlds, other universes, spirit traces all around us. There is an unbelievable pleasure and release in actually conceiving a child. Then, there is Jean's wildness, her drunkenness, the faux leopard skin coat she wears, cowboy boots, cigarettes, marijuana. She's a graphic arts student; she has a shared studio in Powelton Village, with high ceilings; we make love tenderly on a large black divan. I am into all this because she picked me up one night at Philly Java, in the midst of a brutal snowfall. We retreated back to my apartment; I wanted to learn about wild things, wild nights. Jean is a mentor to me and is already a veteran about many things I know little of.

#9

Anyone who is a mentor is also a friend. Jean is sharing her knowledge with me out of pure friendliness. She is bemused by my naïve limitations. She shows me how to do doggy-style; how to sixty-nine; how different kinds of "kink" can liven things up. When she decides to ride me in nothing but cowboy boots, I notice that there are ways to make sex memorable if you have a flair for drama. She insists that we have sex when she is menstruating, and asks me to save the condom as a memento. But in all this friendliness, there are serious undercurrents. I'm not going to be the father of her child; she has other affairs going at the same time; she is fitting me in. Jean is a drifter with a vagabond's restlessness; one day, I leave her at a subway station on Market Street, and am left with a sharp intuitive sense that I may never see her again. One of her equations is, if I can move quickly enough, I can never be bound. Sure enough, she's gone from my life. I have gained in wisdom and experience; she, perhaps, has gained nothing. But when I look at the memories she's left me with, I am struck that they are mostly happy. Vagabond equations leave no room for angst; there is no sense of things withheld. They give you everything they are, and you may keep what you wish.

#10

Heather is easily misinterpreted. She goes to bed with me for complex reasons: because she has pity for this underling artist, who tries so hard to be recognized; because this underling artist gives her treats (a public forum for her own underling art); because she finds him hard to resist after a few drinks; and because, lo and behold, she is genuinely aroused by what happens when these things are investigated. I don't have many interpretations of Heather; she's average height, average weight, a face more handsome than beguilingly pretty (sort of a WASP Frida Kahlo, heavy eyebrows, thick lips, dark hair that rides her head in waves). But what happens in bed is so climactic that it takes us beyond our self-serving interpretations. This is a woman who *gives*; every inch of her is covered in desire, which can (and must) be fulfilled. Heather likes sex more than any other woman I've slept with. She screams, bites, moans, and there is such a delicious fluidity to her movements that, despite her near-homeliness, I am moved to do the same thing. Heather is teaching me how rare it is to find a partner who loves these processes, who makes sex a manifestation of spiritual generosity. We're both almost thirty; I've never seen someone who contains both the generosity and the sense of comfort Heather has in the physical act.

#11

In this favorite game, and when youth is involved, women often hold the cards. Heather has decided that we will have two nights, no more. There is something in me that wants and needs her too much. She is too touched, too moved. It's safer just to flush the thing. I don't particularly realize this, as we sit at the Cherry Street Tavern. All I know is an anxious feeling that I'm going on a trip and Heather is giving me a warm goodbye. It is a trip involving my art and my sense is that I'm going to get killed. Heather, she knows privately, is about to kill me too. She puts in her diaphragm and when I come, it is an exquisite lunge into some variant of heaven. Her intake of breath tells me that she is getting my stream. She might even be frightened that the diaphragm is punctured. Amidst all the peace and its benignity is the sense that things are getting out of hand. This is unsanctioned intercourse, out of mutual dependence; Heather feels this too much. So that, when I get back from my ten days in New England (where I have, in fact, been killed), Heather is nowhere to be found. That part of her that took my streams is loathe to take any more, too happy, too at peace. I learn that Heather represents that great portion of humanity that wants to be in pain. Ecstasy is a dead end street; it is too unreliable, too jumpy. Heather now goes for guys that give her the manner and form of the pain she wants, and not too much of the nice stuff.

#12

Indeed, some equations are about nothing but pain: consummate, unceasing, unyielding pain. With Heather, the extreme fluidity of our intercourse lubricated into being a mixed set of thoughts and emotions. Ecstasy and agony remained in exact, if delicate, balance. From the moment I met Roberta, while still a young boy, her presence engendered in me a sense of extreme attraction and craving, soured by a sense of her as obstinate, obdurate, and generally a hard case. Roberta as a girl had olive skin, not unlike N; lank tawny hair which fell over her eyes and which she used to preen; a sleek, straightforwardly pretty face, which emphasized prominent cheekbones and (slightly) buck teeth. The story of the emergence of her clique in my class, as of fifth grade at Elkins Park Middle School, and my brief immersion in it, is not worth telling. The story of a dynamic tinged towards Pip-Estella, her used by forces above her to torment me, is worth telling. I was in the clique briefly, then out. What caused both of us the most pain, is a simple reality which animated everything which happened between Roberta and I: she wanted me as much as I wanted her, and we both knew it. We were condemned to be in love at the most star-crossed possible angle, and for many years, until the end of high school. Me in the clique, then half-in, then not in at all didn't matter: a force behind her, built into Cheltenham, the school district and the community, compelled her to play Estella for as long as she knew me. Roberta coped by halving things: she was only sort-of Estella, sort of a would-be lover, sort of with Cheltenham, sort of against. Her own equation was to take whatever emotional response she had to me and tramp it into the ground, just to survive, just to eat. We were playing tennis once, and she broke from her protocol (and disrupted the game) just to tell me a parable of sorts. There was this guy she was mad about, but she knew it just couldn't work out. And she'd done everything she could to try and jockey for a different position in her community, and failed. I was still a child, with a child's level of awareness, but even then I knew she sounded suspiciously like she was talking about me. Cheltenham had thrown her a bone: she had one chance to communicate to me, however obliquely, how she felt in my direction. The parable half-worked. I was never really able to achieve certainty, for myself, however, that it was about me. And for seven years, the half-assed romance stumbled forward. Communities destroyed individuals, as usual. Senior year, the sadness of her half-assed inscription in my yearbook leaned on N, who was more fulsome, for redemption; and both leaned me forward, into my days, to reach the apogee I achieved with Trish.

#13

Here I am in New England, getting killed. It's summer, there's weed around, booze. I'm perched on a ledge, feel I'm being pushed off. Look who's here to visit: Wendy, two years older than me, who has two pieces coming out in *Poetry*. My first major piece has been out two months. We immediately become big shots to each other. Wendy has slightly bronzed skin, brownish hair lightened towards dirty blonde, a voluptuous body but a way of holding herself that suggests she finds her own body embarrassing, somehow unworkable. Yet even her diffidence is enticing; it makes guys want to ram through those defenses. Our equation sinks into place: I'm a young Poundian firebrand, she's got all the spiritualized quirkiness of Emily Dickinson, but with sex appeal. We are standing, having drinks in my room, smoking cigarettes in the balminess (open windows, flies). There's a party down the hall we abandoned to smoke in peace. Somehow, a wind current comes into the room and does a loop so that the door closes: a minor miracle, or a universe sign concerning what's meant to happen next. It does: I reach over, begin with gropes, which soon turn into kisses. As we go into this, Wendy lets her hair loose from her ponytail. We are two geniuses, kings and queens, and this is within days of Heather, her positing of me as underling. Such is a life in the arts. When a surfeit of symbolic material lands on two souls, they (sometimes) have no choice but to act them out. As I enter her, Wendy becomes a symbol of my own artistic potency, and I of hers.

#14

As I pound away at Wendy, I notice this about her: she's scared of sex. I am on top of her, she clutches my arms with her hands. It's like she thinks I might go crazy if not held back. Her eyes are opened wide and looking into mine, glazed and petrified. I later find out that fear of sex is one of her great poetic themes. But we bang away on this tiny narrow bed with no sheets in this dorm room that must suffice for this ten-day residency. I try Jean's tricks (variations) but nothing works; Wendy's afraid. She's denied the unction of a stream; I'm wearing a condom. This goes on all night, right through the New England summer 4 am sunrise. There is some gruesomeness to wolf-hour sunlight that only New Englanders know. She leaves me and there is poignancy to her leaving because we both know this cannot happen again; we have taken our roles too far. She can't handle the moves that accrue to the life of a big genius and I don't like this diffidence in her parts that hates sex, loathes feelings, wants to curl up underneath a crab shell and close its eyes forever. I'm twenty-nine, and I'm building relationships that are instantly obsolescent. Wendy, for one night, got to be a goddess, and me to be a god, only to find out that we're just more normal people doing that hallowed, time-honored routine: fake it 'til you make it.

#15

With Heather, Wendy, Julie, and the others: mostly hokey contrivance. All roads must lead back to Jena, because she is where this road begins. Picture a nineteen-year-old woman in the first bloom of rich youth. Not material wealth as in money, but in looks and everything else. Jena stands about 5'6, she has cornstalk blonde hair, cut short into a pageboy. Her large, bright blue eyes tend to widen when she is pleased or aroused, and her smile is wide enough to split her face in half. Thick lips, a roundish face, high forehead, skin just pale enough to make her whole contours have a quality of shock about them; large breasts that do not even have the thought of sag in them; flat stomach; long legs that she deliberately displays in such a way that the adjective "coltish" seems appropriate. Jena was born and bred in a small town; it would be inconceivable that she would have sex for any reason but love. We work up to sex over a period of two months. Because we are working in tune with our emotions, because we let ourselves fall in love first (at twenty, I have been in love before, but never like this), when we get down to the business of physical passion we do it with no holds barred, so that nothing, no roles, no equations, no rigid striations, needs to be contrived. At twenty, I don't quite realize the miraculous nature of what I'm getting; I have no idea how far, how fast, and how bitterly I will have to fall after Jena. I just naively swim into her, her into me, and every squish that happens between our bodies strikes a chord felt by us both.

#16

Jena lives, this year, on the fourth floor of Runkle Hall. I am on her bed; she is sitting astride me, still fully clothed. She fishes me out of my pants. She uses her hands, in such a way I can sense she's done this before. But it doesn't matter, because my mind swims, swirls, does dances. It goes off into space. There is a cosmic dimension to sex that (I will learn later) only manifests with someone you love. So, this is a hand job, but as I come my entire consciousness heaves; whatever is rigid or rigidly held in my brain turns to mush. If there is any ice left, she has taken a pick-ax to it. And, unlike later lovers, she doesn't stop the process when I start to shoot. Her hands move in a steady rhythm for the entire duration of my orgasm. This is, for me, unspeakable, and so generous I'm not ready to appreciate it. As the world falls back into place, as I reenter this static universe, I realize that sex really can lift a human soul upwards. It's just that I have yet to learn the ways it can get stale, so I believe it must always be like this. Jena diligently creates a wad of tissues to clean us off, even as afternoon sun creates curlicues on the two beds (her roommate not home), the ugly painted brick walls (dull tan), the wooden closets that extend up to the ceiling with silver-rail handles, and all Jena's dainty little possessions: a lava lamp, posters (The Who's *Tommy* on Broadway), pictures of her family. Everything lives, for these moments, in a heightened universe (and universal) perspective. Not God, but something Godly.

#17

The ecstasy levels built into my time with Kathy were dead-ended, also, by being too unreliable, too jumpy. It's just that at first Kathy & I didn't notice. I was let loose of the bondage with and to Cheltenham High School; Kathy had been more or less happy at North Penn. Yet, here we were in State College, ready to do what was incumbent upon us to do. Kathy, a stout blonde who alternated between jubilation and self-abnegating catatonia, had met me on the North Halls basketball courts one night while a party rocked the place. We improvised a routine and a place: down into the piano room in the Runkle basement. We took each other's virginity eagerly, avidly, without really noticing, and the meat of the matter was just adventure, passing the time, more adventure. I dealt with Kathy's self-abusive moods by playing therapist, to the extent that I could, and the semester swung around us. My roommate gone, we pushed the two beds in my dorm room together to continue our investigations. The sex itself was clumsy, yet strangely clean of transgression; like a couple of kids using a see-saw or on a calliope. There was a place we couldn't go about depth and a bridge we couldn't cross into the richer straits of passion. She bit my neck and left a purple bruise. The girls in my classes laughed at me, but I was a taken in young man. It's just that Kathy was somewhere else. Her real life remained in Lansdale, and she knew it. And with her camera, which she used with great acumen. I was at least noteworthy, other than for having taken her virginity (and she mine), for being a good photo subject, with my wild hair, baby face, and ragamuffin habits. We were preoccupied away from each other, and the feeling I later had with Jena, that *presence*, was missing. All of which was present in us as we distractedly banged away at each other.

#18

There is the Godly and the diabolical. Someone has stolen Trish away from me; I'm using the Devil's wizardry to get her back. She comes to my apartment, drunk, in a white frilly skirt, hair in a bun, eyes half closed. When the inevitable laying on of hands takes place, Trish mouths a few negatives. Our bodies know that her mouth is being ironic. Faith is something (or someone) you have above the Earth; hands are for taking up out of the Earth to put something else back in again. I am overpowering Trish because we secretly know she is overpowering me. I am part of her equation: let's have sex about art. Since sex about art is meant to turn back into art again, drama, betrayals, secrets, and passionate consummations are all not only valid but mandatory. Her skirt is off, panties down, and for once I don't care how fast this is. I'm in with such ungodly relief that it takes ninety seconds for me to release myself into her. When it's this fast and this good, who cares what the equations are? The only equation is dissolution, and it's as permanent as hokey contrivance, where the human race is concerned. If the diabolical results in as complete a clench of dissolution as Godliness, then who's to say if God and the Devil might not be the same thing? The Devil's universe is as heightened as God's is; the Devil *goes up* just like God does. And, when it ends, you're left with recognitions that all binary systems dissolve in the sexual act, when it is performed without inhibition, and with full knowledge of no consequence.

#19

The problem is that the Devil is in Trish. What he teaches her is that by withholding herself, she makes herself more enticing. So Trish gives and retreats, gives and retreats. She retreats into other guys, other situations, other modes of being. Her fortress can only be taken by force. As she stands before me, blonde hair going part of the way down her back, her long, thin, snaky body is proud of its sovereignty over my existence. There are lights in her blue eyes that have blackness in them, a way she tosses her head to express pure disdain. It takes me eight months of sweat to really *have* her, and once she is had I sweat to *keep* her. The only vengeance I can take for the trials she has put me through is by the force of my thrusts when we make love; she always leads me to a tremendously hell/heaven climax. And this is sex about art; she's the prize, Muse, vixen. She lives in a house in West Philly with a bunch of other artists. When I write her my odes, it is to whip her into shape. The diabolical strain remains within us, because Trish loves to set up moods of transgression. She does little snake-dances to excite me, snake-twists to heighten our pleasure, and drugs and booze subsist that make the entanglement hinge on escapism. That is one of Trish's major equations: let's escape together. Let's pretend nothing exists but us and our devilish pleasure. Let's play a game in which I tease you into mauling me to death, and you come with such force that you almost go around the pill. Let's tempt fate. It always works because her long, thin body is a stark hunger and a mad craving for me.

#20

But what the Devil does falls down around the heels when withholding is the only option. Ginny teaches me this, despite the great difference in our ages (my thirty-three to her twenty-two). When we try to escape, its' to a place of no consummations; when we go up, it's like a tarantula's leg that points back down again. Ginny must withhold because she belongs, in every sense, to her family. The luscious red hair, bulging green eyes, extreme voluptuousness of her appearance belie her raison d'etre: to bind and fasten. As she binds and fastens, there's more looseness than she realizes: you have to give in *sometimes* to get the goods. The truth emerges, after several months of "almost there": Ginny is a virgin. Ginny withholds because her parts have defects. Because she is sickly, her gorgeousness is one of the universe's cruel jokes. The joke is on her and her would-be lovers, and, like most of the best jokes, it isn't that funny. Ginny is one of those strange girls that seems to have no interests in life; that thinks that her body is her only mind; and that her body that is her mind must be so much an issue of blood that to blood it must return. To be a tart is simply recreation; but there is no sense of seriousness or duty behind it. Yet Ginny stands on the mountain of her own pulchritude, and surveys the carnage at the bottom with calculated niceness. She has never known submissiveness, even as part of a strategic plan, and never will; so she perpetually awakens to see she's done no real damage. Her mountain is a reverse mountain, which runs from the soil into hell. At a key moment, in the middle of a summer at the end of the Aughts, with Trish unhappily in Manhattan, Tobi fading, the Free School a memory, Ginny and her friends take the Drop hostage. I earn the right and privilege to be in Ginny's apartment (on Pine Street, down the street east from the Drop) several times, which resembles Julie's, high ceilings, wooden floors. Ginny sits next to me on her sofa and watches children's movies on her laptop. I try nothing. She wields an axe, and her physiology is resolutely shut-down, compacted. The Drop waves the white flag, and, as I knew even then, an era was ending. Everything about her group signaled that we'd all been having too much fun, and that the Center City-wide party was over. Actual sex was passe, beside the point. Besides, it was noticeable that when I walked around Center City that summer with Ginny, which I did, everyone looked at us as though we were a couple. Only I knew what was being withheld. The image crafted made me look studly. To her, that was more than enough. Funny: she wouldn't do bars. She just did her translation of bar-life into coffee shops, Temple classrooms, occasional drama productions. She was, herself, her own production— when she wore low-cut tops, or dresses, she was showing everyone who she was, and her breasts were a bared switchblade. That equation: sex used as an over or undertone to or for violence, or just the threat of violence: was big for her. Her tits were a weapon which could extort from the world what she wanted. All our idealism was replaced with back to the grind cynicism. Ginny's favorite dress for special occasions was black, and bared the fangs of her cleavage the right way.

#21

Have I ever stood wholly on my own reverse mountain? I met Cindy at the Bean on South Street. She was Cuban, with long, stringy black hair, large, frightened blue eyes, and a full figure. Moreover, she exuded a mood of emotional desperation. She was a scared kid and I (age twenty-nine) was on the prowl. The equation was mutual neediness, for separate reasons— she needed me to allay her hunger for affirmation, her need to be needed; I needed her to provide food for a voracious hunger for female flesh. And when I saw her apartment (almost a loft, pictures she had taken strewn everywhere), it added to the novelty aspect of the experience. I penetrated her sans protection, knowing how her neediness could be manipulated; and a torn condom wrapper by the side of the bed painted a picture that could not be mistaken. This girl was lonely. I was in this for the high (no other reason), and while she slept I rode the high out into the universe. I learned that the universe is not only *higher up* but *deeper in*. Because I was only higher up, I felt my high fade into a depression. Cindy clung to me, but the man I was for her that night was a nothingness. Everything I'd done had hurt her, as I later found out. When notches start accruing to your bedpost, it is hard to avoid the crassly materialistic attitude that another notch equals victory. The cost is a series of flights into nothingness, the sensation of a nitrous high gone bad.

But there are times (not too many) when godliness arrives with a certain cleanliness. They usually aren't next to each other. When I make love to Jena, our bodies actually exude love; there are times when I feel so raw that I seem to have been dropped in an ocean of hunger. But it is hunger only for Jena and no one else, and when we wade into the ocean together it is to breathe. Glamorous circumstances are unnecessary, it is still dorm rooms, mine and hers, but we bring in so much ocean that glamour happens the second we touch. The godliness is in the cleanliness of our equations— she simply wants me and vice versa. I release my streams into her, noting how strange it feels to do this inside someone. Innocence is a miracle that neither of us yet appreciate. What's most innocent is the fact that we both like doing this— others would later teach me that many enjoy the drama and the intensity of situations *around* sex but not the act itself. Jena, in her unselfconsciousness, lets her body go and floats downward into the interstices of consciousness. She does by instinct what men do by force. I watch her face with a kind of wonder— its subtle shifts, slight changes, abrupt mouth movements. We become objects of envy; people want to take what we have. But I'm lost in Jena and the season and its illusions of permanence. What godliness is, is whatever is good, and stays. These memories remain; yet humanity is born of humility (I have sinned, I dwell in imperfection). If, now, the only way out is words, so be it.

#23

Lisa is convenient for me and vice versa: we work together and, contrary to popular belief, sometimes it helps to eat where you shit. Lisa has big moon eyes, shoulder-length black hair, skinny, medium height. There is no specific mark to raise her looks above the ordinary. Our life together is founded on the maintenance of routines, rituals. We always smoke *this* much pot, have *this* many drinks, listen to *this many* albums per night. Where sex is concerned, we please each other, simply and without fuss. There is no universe but the visible one; nothing goes down or up. But how much of this is nothingness? I'm not pushing deeper into anything; she's a solid mass, someone substantial that doesn't have to take me anyplace. Through a year and a half, this is the way it is. Then, I hear a siren call in the distance. It has spirit traces in it, a sense of romance. I learn that I cannot be a slave to routine; there is too much in me which craves the exceptional. I begin putting Lisa off: small ways first, then big ways. Another night like all the others suddenly feels consonant with horror. Shock, says Freud, is the necessary precondition of orgasm. While the orgasms I've had with Lisa have been pleasant enough (she's been on the pill for the duration of the relationship), I'm shocked into an awareness of Otherness through sex. The problem is that, strictly speaking, Freud is wrong; sex is (as most eventually learn) usually a domestic sport that holds no surprises. But (unfortunately) domesticated sex leads to bad art. So when I followed the siren away from Lisa, I was following a trail to more words, more images. Is this mature? Where sex and art are concerned, there is no maturity; there are just two imperatives in one puny body, with not too many breaths left, in this universe of a billion years.

#24

To dwell on that siren call: it isn't really transcendental. It's meant to lift you up, then plonk you back down again (wet or dry, as the case may be). It serves the siren, not you. Trish knows these rules very well, has studied them. Her approach to playing the role is methodical— you give them this much, and then draw back. Not everyone responds to Trish's particular wavelength because it presupposes not just intelligence but artistry. You must be a figure worthy of representation for her to take you seriously. Conversations must shoot up around colors, forms, images. The drunken nights I spend at her studio (white and red wine) are an epiphany. I've never had my mind and body turned on at the same time. Trish knows this; she is going down the checklist. Her postures and gestures are bold and dramatic; when she takes the pins out of her bun and lets her long hair fall down her back, part of me falls, too. It's winter; the studio (three of the four walls being mostly windows) is chilly. I've grown a slight moustache but, at twenty-five, still look boyish. Trish doesn't take my songs or poems seriously; they are unproven, not high enough. My thoughts crave her approval as my body aches for her submission. In this way, we dance. Trish is shrewd; she knows that, with my intense urgency, she must give in (at least once) almost instantly. She likes taking the superior position and her long torso contrasts neatly with Lisa's petite squatness. But (importantly) she hasn't fallen. She's played her part well; I've fallen alone.

#25

Of human bondage: Trish keeps me down at the heels. It always involves someone else: I get picked up and dropped as others present themselves, disappear. When I fade into the wilderness, it is with an incomplete sense of self. Trish has lopped off a part of me and fastened it to her chest. For eight months, my spirit life is a limbo; I go up and down with Trish's tides. By mid-summer, I have claimed her, using the diabolical as a resource. Yet I still take her with the fierceness born of thwarted passion. At the moment I release myself, her head snaps to the side, there is a sharp intake of breath, and her blue eyes pop open and bulge. My body wants to go into her as far as possible, to get myself back. I learn the pure deliciousness of angry sex. The house she lives in has no central air; we sweat through the long nights. Trish's room looks out on a small courtyard, with a central concrete patch and grass around. When we're stoned, I see Blakean striations in these little grass-plots; the smallness, tenderness, greenness. Me and Trish are often stoned; we escape our jobs, our uncertain futures (are we to be geniuses or nonentities), our sense of a moribund United States (collapsed towers still fresh in our minds), even the brittle hopes that hurt more often than not. The seeds we plant in those little grass-plots spill over onto the concrete.

#26

When I converse with N on the phone, in about my thirteenth year, our heads open up together, and we create an imaginative landscape out of nothing at all. Events around us, our classmates, notorious or boring or uproarious events of the days get used as fodder, parties, dances, and we hoist the whole rig up and sail it into the sky. We dance ourselves around our desire for each other: are we friends, or could we be more? When we broadcast together, other will sit and listen, spellbound. But to the left and to the right, even at thirteen, is the impulse to share our bodies as well as our souls and brains. N is conservative this way. She maintains a deep need to keep physicality light in and around her— she doesn't play sports, can't swim, is an excellent dancer but not a dab hand as a walker of city blocks, either. All her thoughts are of transcendentalizing past her own body, which is arrayed around her like marsh to wade through. The problem is a hold she wants to maintain over my emotions. We act, often, like newlyweds, but because she will not submit to me physically in any way, my emotions, unconsciously set at a skeptical angle, cannot cleave to her finally, like a ship docking in at a port. Sexual devotion often starts, I learn later, with the body, the physical mechanism. Our bodies are the primordial fact of who, and what we are. So, we talk on the phone for hours, imaginative leap follows imaginative leap, but imaginative leaps are not a basis for a man's devotion. Not that I'm aware of this at thirteen. All I know is that our brains are doing something intense together, and I like the feeling, but my soul craves a reality somewhere between us that cuts deeper, from sharper, starker angles, into a sense of achievement, conquest, victory, a permanent sense of marking and being marked. Later, it is Trish who brings all these algorithms together. She knows only too well what I am, and what I want. We imaginatively leap all over the cosmos together, hand in hand or separately, but the climax, the final imposition of the most profound shared imagination into the most profound imaginative leap, is back into our bodies and, when we are good together, out again, out into a re-entry of the cosmos, as a finality.

#27

Audrey, as a tangent to N, took the idea, not of broadcasting gossip but of sharing and disseminating literature, as a fait accompli move to establish romance, drama, suspense, and rich entanglement in her life. Prisoner of a rich background, and with a preacher for a father, she latched onto me as a purveyor of sweets for her, from my books to my looks to a sense of deference she wanted me to sometimes have as a way of demonstrating respect for her roots. The one determinative moment— we stood, with a crowd of poets, outside a bar in Andersonville, Chicago, as a night of festivities ended, and I was either going to pick her up somehow or not— ended in, for me, a practical response of denial. Her apartment was in an obscure neighborhood in Chicago, I was staying in the distant 'burb Palatine, and was due in Rockford the next afternoon. For Audrey, as she was later candid about, I was resisting something compelling in the universe which required that we spend the night together. She was heartbroken, with her Indiana-bred sense of being cornfed (blonde, voluptuous, clear complexion), and with the conviction she had that anything she wanted could always be hers. Rich equations suffer greatly from senses of entitlement, emanating from the rich, and dousing all that they touch with a glaze of non-recognition, of obliviousness. This was Audrey's contradiction— give her a text, available to be read at her leisure, incapable of vocalizing need or difference of any kind, and she could rise to the occasion brilliantly. Texts had a way of ejaculating into her brain and heart tissue, in a lovemaking routine (with the right text at the right time) extremely pleasurable for her. As I stood with her outside Moody's Pub, a flesh and blood entity— needy, morose, possibly surprising or disobedient the wrong way— turned her interest tempered with diffidence. This decided the night for us. Had we been ensconced together for several days, as I had been with Wendy, things might have been different. But when two possible lovers are too transient to each other, the magic spells don't work, incantations fall flat, and it is learned again that for equations to take on flesh in the world, there is no substitute for real, raw time.

#28

I get lost in the social nexus oriented around Trish's house. It's all painters and musicians. Trish has a friend called Tobi who's around a lot. Tobi is tiny and elfin (barely five feet), with an exquisitely sculpted face— cheekbones, blue eyes, full lips. Tobi is another painter and Trish and Tob tend to share things— drugs, guys, ideas. Tob is funnier than Trish and her laughter is contagious. But there's a paranoid strain in her that hates being excluded from things and gets snappish when she feels it happening. Of course, Tob and I desire each other. One night, the three of us happen to be at my apartment. Trish is taking a bath; we're all high. For some reason, Tob and I get in a wrestling match. I pin her to the floor (wall-to-wall beige carpeted), and for a few seconds I hold her down. What is consummated in these moments is the sense we both have that we will eventually sleep together. The three of us live up to Trish's romantic ideal— young, gorgeous, promiscuous artists in an intoxicated ménage. But Tob, unlike Trish, cannot do monogamous relationships (or most other kinds). The extreme regularity of my antics with Trish, once a schedule has been established, cannot be replicated with Tob. I feel it is more intelligent, at this point, to stick to (and with) Trish. We do gain an added sheen of glamour from Tob's presence, and we're all too young to inquire into the nature of glamour: its essential evanescence.

#29

Tob hovers between straightness and gayness. It is years later; I've broken things off with Trish. We're upstairs at the Khyber, me with my friends, Tob with hers. We're dancing and I start to do touchy-feely moves. This is it; this is the preordained time at which Tob and I consummate things (she put me in my place a year ago because we were both still too close to Trish). I show up at her apartment the next day; she spends the night at my apartment. But there's some fakery involved and our equation involves contingencies: I'm putting together shows for her band, she needs to keep me (for them) in place. We take a bath, and Tob begins giving me a very thorough (and loving) blowjob. The problem is, this won't *count* for me unless we actually have penetrative sex. So I stop myself from finishing in her mouth, take her to bed, put on the condom and do the deed, without finishing. I let my piggish principles interfere with Mother Nature's chosen course. By disobeying Nature, I have already given Tob a reason to mistrust me. The truth is, she will never forgive me for seducing her. She doesn't like guys that much anyway. The kind of impulse that chooses willfulness over acceptance can never have consonance with satisfaction, and pleasure.

#30

Use of force is anathema to the deepest part of the sexual impulse. A girl like Michelle has precocious parts; but they hinge on her fulfilling the role she has created for herself, of high school Don Juana. She prowls Center City Philly, looking for slightly older guys to hook up with. I'm twenty-three, fresh back from my year in New York City. Michelle has hair dyed black and cut into bangs a la Bettie Page. She has nice, fine features and leans towards the plumpish. Her equation is simple: *let's make this an adventure*. The problem is that this hankering after adventure is a kind of sickness; she'll do anything to escape the confines of the lonely suburbs, and two overbearing parents. The first night I meet her, we make out at 6th and Walnut as she waits for her bus. It's a rainy night and we're buffoonish and we get stared at. A feeling of transgression flares up in me which is difficult to overcome; but my youngish looks have put me through this before. Sex, in almost all of its forms, is a hopeless slave to appearances; you get, more often than not, the partners you look like you should get. I've noticed that money doesn't change things that much; you can't buy looks, and, for the most part, you can't buy genuine, organic sex. When age is factored in, sex begins to look like what it largely is: a devious force, a motivating undercurrent, which gives us our greatest consonance with humanity before leaving at its appointed time, when appearances build up too many walls for it to topple.

#31

Yet quirks and idiosyncrasies facilitate fluidities— we all like what we like, just as we want what we want. For whatever reason, when I break up with Trish for the first time I fall in love with Sara, who I meet at the Last Drop. Sara is just graduating from the University of the Arts, with a journalism degree. She has bright blue eyes, a thick neck, a long, turned-up nose, and a massive bust, and for some reason (she resembles Cara in State College) it works for me. Moreover, she's a would-be occultist who likes what I'm writing for the paper we both write for. The first major break with Trish leaves me confused, restless, and also, given the Center City scene at the time, expectant. Everywhere I went, I found more interesting people. I became sensitized to Sara fast. This sense of being sensitized was not, it appeared to me, reciprocated. It was a simple, and essential, equation: I wanted her more than she wanted me, if she wanted me at all. I felt something where she did not. I knew this by instinct, and tried not to know. Yet, I was allowed, and given her super-hipster status (she's in with all the right bands and DJs), it was a privilege, to get to know her, quirks and all. Sara liked to leave things up in the air; her equation with sex was oriented around speech. That is, Sara liked to talk about sex more than she liked to have it. She loved the intrigue of conversation, rather than flesh meeting flesh; the sparkle of a public tete a tete, rather than actual skin scintillations. I discovered this over a period of months, as I was baffled by Sara's behaviors. She moved me compulsively; I always wanted more of her. The final equation she left me with is this: the wanting is sweeter (and sexier) than the having. But there's something I noticed amiss in this: Sara's equations were frightened. They presupposed a minimum of experience, and a maximum of insecurity on every conceivable level. My failure to physically penetrate Sara devastated me as much as the collapse of my established relationship with Trish. With Sara began a life spent in bars. I learned the right way to tip, to stare, to make successful moves over drinks; all those street level skills were a mountain to climb and a primer to master.

#32

New Years' Eve, 2004: I meet Patti at a bar off of South Street. We dance and play the usual touchy-feely games. Somehow the timing isn't right— either she's not interested or I'm too distracted. Months go by and I don't see her; then, I'm walking, alone, down Pine Street one spring midnight and Patti staggers into me. She's mushy and I can't make out what she's saying but we squish towards each other anyway. It's a nice squish and so we start sort of going out. Patti doesn't drink just sometimes like Sara does; Patti *requires* drinks. There is something bestial in her soul that only alcohol can conquer. But drinks make you say and do funny things that aren't strictly natural (whereas getting stoned can make things more naturalized) so that Patti and I establish immediately the artificiality of our together equations. Patti likes to speak in tongues, talk gibberish, talk Russian— I humor her. But in our drunkenness I realize that Patti is avoiding completely consummating our relationship. We take walks down side streets in the wee hours and make out and grope against walls; roll in the grass beside the Walnut Street Bridge, my hand in her skirt; but the big caress never happens. Everything has to be drama, everything has to be public, and since we can't have sex in public we might as well not have it at all. Then, she starts to torture me with other barfly guys. This is life *in the street*; not within reaching distance of the godly, or the diabolical. *You make your image what it is, then you are what your image is*— that's the basic street equation.

#33

Trixie Belle is the ultimate barfly. This is a woman who begins the day with a six-pack. She then orients all other activities around her drinks. Her primary occupation consists of latching on to guys who will provide her free alcohol for prolonged periods of time. This equation includes the possibility of sex, but Trixie Belle is shrewish, has a history of sexual abuse in her family and can never actually *have* sex. The facts are the facts: Trixie Belle is ravishingly, inescapably gorgeous. She's 5'6, long-legged and thin; her face has the sharpness and the contours of a *Vogue* model's; straight auburn hair falls down her back and in bangs over her eyes. She's the kind of woman you can see once on the street and never forget. In spurts, she puts together bands and writes songs. Though a master of the fine art of couch surfing, most of Trixie Belle's money (there's not much of it) comes from her Mom, and she still has a bedroom in her Mom's two-story house in Upper Darby. I fall into Trixie Belle the way most guys fall into Trixie Belle: by mistaking her gorgeousness for inner radiance. Over several nights, a routine establishes itself: we meet at a bar and I buy her a few drinks; we then migrate to another bar and I buy her a few more drinks, etc. I look for excuses to play touchy-feely games; I accustom myself to considering Trixie Belle a new conquest. Motions are made to get Trixie Belle back to my apartment. Trixie Belle gets nasty when she sees the Penn degree on my wall; she needs an *obedient mirror*; I have become a disobedient one. As the night progresses, I see my illusions grated like cheese into little flakes.

#34

Trixie Belle has taken up a pair of scissors, is looking for things in my apartment to stab. She settles on a few of my chairs that have covers on them. I'm drunk and don't have the will to resist. She stabs away and it becomes a metaphor for what I could do inside her. I live on the second story and there are many windows facing the street. Several tenants in the buildings across the street are watching Trixie Belle's exhibitionistic display. She decides to do interpretive dances to enhance the performance and I find myself severed from whatever innocence I might have left. I see, through Trixie Belle, that many people do lead pointless lives. The only equation that really moves Trixie Belle is a simple one: anything that lives needs to be destroyed. As I follow her movements, I realize two things: that she wants to destroy me, and that she's not shrewd enough to realize that her best strategy (like Trish's) is to give and then take away, rather than not to give at all. At the end of the night, Trixie Belle strips and gets into bed with me; but I'm not allowed to touch. Her skin is perfect and porcelain-like; her breasts show no hint of sag. But she's been abused; her perfection is brittle and, beneath the madness, cold.

#35

I meet Heather in a bar; I have created a context in which bars are the only place to do social business. Everyone in the arts wants to get drunk; unfortunately, I learn that not everyone in the arts is actually an artist. For every soul that goes up over words, images, or sounds, there are ten souls that lust after praise, glamour, and intrigue. Now I have cohorts that help me do business in the arts. Our business is to recruit artists to perform in one of our shows. Because all of us happen to be males, the competition levels among us over females is intense (we're all more or less straight). When a new woman sits down with us (who may or may not prove to be one of our prize performers), it's off to the races. Heather sits down and Mick happens to be more on the ball than me. Everything he says hits the bull's eye; all his moves lock into Heather's. The exquisite anguish of living in bars; when someone else's moves work and yours don't. What's pitiable about all of us is that we live in these anguished edges; everything hinges on social contingencies. You watch someone else move in for the kill, and feel your own dryness. Later, this changes; Heather falls for my moves. What I learn is that in this jungle atmosphere, all positive contacts can be useful. Because I don't snap or cock block Mick, Heather becomes someone held in reserve. The problem with all of these levels is that they turn human beings into chess pieces. You can't go up, you can only move around on the board. Bars and street life harden people into rigid postures that are difficult to efface. If you fall in love with this hardness, you become a flush.

#36

When I take Lisa to bars, there's still an edge of innocence. We often feel like intruders; we haven't learned the rules and folkways. But Trixie Belle is the one who puts the zap on my head about bars, and the lives that play themselves out there. When I meet her years later, she hasn't changed much. Her posture, the image it creates, is still hard. This time, however, I have graduated out of bars. I can no longer stand the posturing, the moves, the head-games. Trixie Belle refuses, as before, to be touched much. I can run my hands all over her body but her clothes stay on. The situation disintegrates because this time I won't buy her drinks. If she wants a six-pack for breakfast, she has to pay for it herself; if she's going to enter my apartment, she's not to do any damage. To the extent that anyone, male or female, can tame Trixie Belle, I have tamed her. In six years, I have learned certain things. I know that, whatever outward circumstances determine one's life, having a mind of some cleanliness matters most. There are clean bums and dirty Presidents; clean janitors and dirty CEOs. Whatever I say to Trixie Belle, it's put through such a damaged filter that nothing gets in, nothing is retained; so what is she doing here? My weakness dictates that if a beautiful woman wants some kind of succor, I will give it to her; that I am a servant to all forms of female beauty. I have my own cleanliness issues and this is one of them.

#37

Bars work into sex equations; so does travel. When Wendy and I hook up in New England, we manifest not only guts and bravado, but glamor. We are transients there, doing what transients do. What I make with Kyra, who shares a large flat in the East Village with one of her also-fashionista friends, is even more gruesomely constructed. Kyra is John's sister. John and I are running the Philly Free School together. When we stop off to spend the day with Kyra in Manhattan, and then the night, I know instantly that (as is gruesome to admit I could be this crass) I can make a score here. Kyra is drastically, dramatically about charm, glamor, and intrigue. The raven-haired, buxom look she favors is pure Liz Taylor, skin slightly bronzed more than Liz, and, most importantly, a physiology which does not say (as most physiologies do) no instantly. All her postures, jests, glances suggest there is room in her. Yet with John to think of (this is his sister), the transient sucker punch into bed would depend on me being (as Wendy had been to her benefactors in New Hampshire) more brutish than usual. Decentered away from our personal norm, against a novel backdrop, in the middle of a period of expansion and growth, why shouldn't I be brutish? Now's the time. At a bar not far from her flat, John and I hold court. Here is Samantha, a friend of mine from the old Manhattan days. We flirt outrageously, too. I've got a girl on either side of me on an elegant sofa (Manhattan, more than Philly, favors sofas in bars). John is bemused. Punch-drunk on all the attention, I understand that Samantha lives too far away, in the recesses of Brooklyn. Tonight it must be Kyra, or no one. John is also high as a kite and more tolerant than most. When the three of us tumble drunkenly back into Kyra's apartment, the crunch comes. I'm either going to make a play to sequester myself in Kyra's room with Kyra or be more civil with John, and less pushy generally. Fortunately or unfortunately (and channeling, perhaps, Baudelaire's Good Devil), I feel the game within me, and have just the right concoction running through my veins to see it through to the end. A bar is a game; travel is a game, often, too; and when game-stakes are raised, you either rise to the occasion or you don't. The door is eventually shut on John, who can't not laugh (welcome to P.F.S., right?), and I am alone with Kyra. The night is hot, her room not air conditioned. We don't talk much. I find myself riding the game, pushing the river, and what happens is not masterful or revelatory, but adequate. The fashionista appurtenance items (mostly clothes to be debuted, turned in to authorities, or discarded), sounds of the East Village beneath us, even Marlboro Reds to smoke (not my usual brand), all coalesce into a sense that having started on one square on a game board (that's bar-talk), I've done a game version of a check-mate. I've been a Zen arrow into space the right way. Even as I am not unaware that deeper questions and resonances are being unanswered, and John has real reason to be annoyed. For the night, I am Kyra's appurtenance item and she mine. This inverts who I am with Trish and Jena, but once the action's over and Kyra's asleep, there's no way out. The equation is: you did it, and that's it.

#38

Some situations cannot be cleansed. Dell comes to the Last Drop on a headhunt for me. She has her black hair cut short like a 1920s flapper; she's tall, ungainly (not fat, but loose-limbed), and her blue eyes are guileless. She has rules— we have to hang out once before we sleep together; when she does make it to my apartment, her nerves dictate that we fall quickly and efficiently into bed. We make love, and I wear a condom. She's not enthusiastic or unresponsive— she likes me, but not too much. Her equation involves impulses— if she suddenly wants you and if you want her, you're in luck. Nothing can be planned too methodically— sex just has to erupt with some kind of Virgoan perfection (her sign), and then there it is. I choose, however foolishly, blunt honesty as the best tactic in this situation. Dell, at twenty-three, has never had a genuine relationship and is easily humiliated. I don't particularly realize this, but it sinks in that hit and runs have only a small chance of going up. It has taken me into my thirties to ascertain the emptiness of two foreign bodies— how sex can be a natural disaster.

#39

That first spring I spent in State College, Hope swept hopelessly away from my friends and I as a siren. With her pitch black hair, dark eye make-up, Cure shirts, she embodied the mystery of the Gothic, which was a countercultural subtext in the Nineties about outsider-ism, what it meant to subsist as a freak in the world. I didn't know what she would be like up close— as of August, and the fall semester starting, the dimensional angle hit me as hard as Hope did, who was not taking no for an answer, with any of us. The attitude, once you gained access to her room, was as pure Don Juana as it could be. When she, frankly, pulled off her panties and offered me her crotch, the heat of it made me swoon, so that I could only half-function. She was too bold, too blunt. All of her was fiercely dark, and the fade into her was to cleave to the darkness. Yet, the tactile thing, about lovemaking and sex and the right kinds of delicacy and the right blend or savior faire towards mixing seductiveness, aggression, and restraint, was beyond her. Hope wanted sex to manifest as a Gothic ideal, a stand taken for burrowing into each other's permanent, corrosive darkness. What two bodies are actually supposed to do to make sex a something pleasurable, was not a relevant reality, when all that black eyeliner spoke more. All of which meant that sex here fell down, past her sharp jaw-line, bulging eyes, and exotically wrought face, into a way of demonstrating rebellion, obstinacy against the normative, but also awkwardness between two bodies hardening and softening in and out of harmony with each other, with their own nudity, and with an attitude too militant, too fierce. I learned that, movies and other cultural talisman objects aside, real sex requires real tenderness, for men as well as women, and when tenderness goes missing, so, generally, does ecstasy.

#40

The negative wisdom I learn from Trish is much trickier. Because she gives me her body, without stint or reservation, I never quite realize what she takes back for herself. She has my emotions on a string; she holds the passkeys to my moods; my days are oriented around her. Because she is sparing in the way she presses my sore spots, it's difficult to notice that she's mastered them— where they are, how to tweak them. Over a period of years, she learns sophisticated techniques to keep my string ties to her tautened. One favorite button has to do with the past, or what Joyce calls "The Dead": when she zaps me with past lovers, I dance madly. Or, that she's suicidal— nothing lasts, nothing's worth it (which means, of course, I'm not worth it either). I dance into my caretaker suit and try to hit the right buttons on her switchboard; but she's better at hiding things than I am. It is her best trick to make me responsible for her entire existence. Because I try to and cannot make her want to live, I'm a failure and an embarrassment. The only thing that goes up about this situation is its extremity— the high sense of drama she builds into her flourishes. She'll be Ophelia, even if I refuse to be Hamlet. She twirls in circles, makes herself dizzy; drinks, intoxicates herself; pictures herself in a Gothic romance. I'm as enthralled as I am stymied by my own impotence. There's so much beauty to Trish's spectacles; but they fall down when you realize her essential aim is selfish. She needs to maintain her position as the center of attention. She leaves permanent scars, with all this negative wisdom, but my truth is simple: no one wants to be completely mastered.

#41

Lisa is as close as I've come to completely mastering someone. Lisa's ambitious; she comes from a working-class background. She sees all the middle-class status symbols around me and feels she must serve me, even though my moods and need to create seem obscure to her. Moreover, I am a status symbol for her at her place of employment— I actually do shows, perform regularly in a major metropolis, record my music. The glamour of this rubs off on Lisa, but also intimidates her. I learn from Lisa the kind of smallness that some people feel about themselves and their lives. It's not just that Lisa doesn't have many large thoughts; it's that she deliberately limits her thoughts to narrow avenues. Yet this is not from lack of brain-power; Lisa scored higher on the SATs than I did. It's just that large thoughts carry with them the vertiginous unease of the sublime. This willful sense of limitation carries over into our bed— Lisa instinctively makes the same moves every time we make love. Lisa makes herself easy to master because she makes herself static; and she does it to please me. Her equation presupposes that what I want I will always want. How much in human relationships can be reduced to habit?

#42

Intermittence equations are relevant to every relationship. Most people love to have a lover leave and then return. The problem with Trish's return is that we still have the same problems we had the first time. We have burrowed too deeply into each other; Trish still enjoys sex in the abstract (as an element of Gothic fiction, with her as the heroine) more than she enjoys the physical act. As I get older, I want to give as well as receive pleasure; but Trish is never pleased. As my body satisfies itself, I realize Trish is not on the journey with me. Even a satiated body can get bored with its own satiety. We still escape into movies and marijuana; we still make an enjoyable spectacle as a couple. But too much needs fixing and fixing things is not usually a romantic process. We aren't effortlessly floating up from the surface; we're pushing through bullshit to find the surface again. Trish has no interest in fixing things; to be workmanlike is beneath her. So we hit the same old impasses and do the same old dances. When Trish flushes us this time, it sticks; when I feel uncharitable, I call her a female Peter Pan. Trish has turned intermittence into a stasis; she has frozen herself into her role as temptress, romantic heroine, Ophelia. Romantic heroines don't need to fix things; everything happens naturally, narratives move things along. But I'm in my thirties and I realize that when anyone hardens against changes, relationships become unworkable. Somewhere between Trish and Lisa, a happy medium exists— some reliability, some intermittence. As of 31, I haven't found it, and I become lost, up for anything.

#43

When you're lost and up for anything, it becomes down at the heels to decide what you want. I'm thirty-one and in the process of getting my PhD. I meet Arti at a reading thrown by MFA students at a bar on South Street. Though I happen to be in the process of wooing someone else, Arti is insistent. She's Bangladeshi, with long, luxuriant black hair, darkish complexion, and large breasts. After mysteriously landing at my table, she clutches my hand under the table. There is so much insistence in her grasp, I receive the impression that Arti has been secretly coveting me for some time. But when we return to my place, everything goes amiss. Arti is a beleaguered Muslim trying to fit in at an American university; a nascent novelist who writes brilliant pieces that nevertheless do not cohere; and a miserable human being who relishes her misery. As we writhe around, it occurs to me that I have become the male version of a slut. They have a name for this at Temple: *man-whore*. I am someone who will take whatever a willing woman will give me. I can be taken by force, stealth, or subtlety. I have no boundaries. The only element that redeems me from the condition of a thirty-something Peter Pan is that the ladies, like Arti, come to me. Arti twists, and turns, and writhes; now she is throwing a fit about having broken one of her laws. My role is to assist her in finding the right pitch and key for her fugues. I fecklessly hope that this, unlike all the other encounters, will turn into a relationship. But it soon becomes apparent that Arti's rages are as boundless as my fecklessness. When Arti *cuts*, she doesn't mess around; we'll probably never speak again. I'm left with the soul-hollowness of one who repeats mistakes.

#44

There has never been, in all of this, a moment of being totally lost, derelict. I have always been able to locate myself somewhere. When I meet Zeld on the R6, I immediately sense the electricity of some kind of intercourse between us. What I want most is revenge on Trish for having slept outside the relationship. Zeld is tall, brown-haired but freckled, a sort-of-into the arts type. She likes to show up in hippie dresses, get down to business fast, and then leave. I don't feel lost about this; I need to get revenge, Zeld is available; but this is my most derelict moment as a lover. There is nothing between Zeld and I, no redemptive seams holding the construct together. Our sex happens to make a point to someone else, because Trish and I are not only competitive, we would kill to get an edge on each other. The deep loneliness we escape via competitive gains never gets resolved; the empty spaces in us never organically fill. When Zeld dances out of my life, I forget that she ever danced in. The games begin with Trish again, and with renewed intensity. I win by thrusting, she wins by yielding; and our souls experience prolonged periods of sustained ugliness. In love, reversals occur that take years to decode. In public, Trish and I move into high spectacle mode— there are parties, brawls, ménages. I never think what the punishment for this will be— that having navigated to a home that turns out to be no home, I lose consonance with knowing what a home is, and how I can help to build one.

#45

Growing up with Emma, who had been in my class at CHS, wasn't like growing up with Roberta. It wasn't like anything. Emma, a lanky blonde with long, lank blonde hair, a chiseled, cat-like face, and long limbs, looked like a stunt double for Trish, and had been merely an acquaintance. She was quiet, and kept to herself. Her friends were among the geeks of the class. Why and how Emma knew to show up now, in the midst of all this turbulence with Trish, I have no idea, but she did. I laughed because she so resembled Trish, but I was also aroused. I liked the idea, past N and Roberta, of a real hook-up within my class, even ten years after the fact. She was there, at the Last Drop, on a succession of key summer days, in a sleeveless white blouse. After all these years, her cat-face grew on me as enchanting, compelling, suggestive of something her whole presence insinuated— she identified heavily with Trish, and had a female impulse to demarcate turf which could also be hers. Whether she'd been stalking us or just heard what was happening with us from the suburbs, I still don't know. I knew she was commuting to Center City from somewhere. What she wanted was just one night with me, I later concluded. When, on the one late afternoon I made my way with her back to Logan Square, we were ensconced, she took out a bottle of Robitussin as though it were an aperitif, and she were Trixie Belle. She wanted, as she said, a Robo-trip. It was part of the magic of that night that Emma wound up encapsulating for me so many different partners at once, including partners merely being anticipated. I found it easy to begin making love to her, because she made it easy. Her equation was interesting, about female levels of awareness— everything about her physiology screamed, you always wanted me the most, but you just didn't know it. You're a man— you don't know these things. I have delivered myself to you because you need me now, and I need you. Now you may begin to learn who you are. And we made love with great fluidity and rapidity, and then we made love again. Her fluidity was like Heather's would be, and the sense of being lulled into a trance of perpetual, high-intensity intercourse, on the bed, then on the living room floor, on the couch in the living room, from the front, from the back, was like Jena. We each gave the other a show-stopping performance, manifesting (as was odd, and as I was not too dumb and callow to notice) an inversion of our years of starving for each other. The absolute ecstasy of several mutual orgasms was the tactile insignia, as it might've been with Roberta and N, of an eternity of denial overcome. This, even as what was built into us both had been noticed only by her. Why, in sex equations, women usually hold the cards: women are receptive to sensory data on a deeper level than men, and have a primordial understanding of physiology, of bodies and more bodies, which men do not. When bodies speak, women listen more. Emma and I shared a home, but only she registered what our bodies shared, what was in them. When Trish showed up, it was a red flag from nature that it would be Emma's time to show up too. Even if it proved to be the cosmic design that after one night, I would never see Emma again.

#46

I often feel most at home with Lisa, because she so wants me to be her home. Thanksgiving 2000, we are at my family's house in Glenside. This has everything Lisa wants— the façade of solid middle-class consonance; plenty of food, central heating, an edge of refinement (my Mom's art-prints lining every room). After the family has retired for the night, Lisa and I sneak out to smoke a bowl in the back yard. As we gaze up at the stars, there is nothing between us but warmth, ease, comfort. We shuffle down to the basement (where we are to sleep on the fold-out couch) and make love with complete abandon. The pot has loosened us up so that our bodies tangle gloriously. We come with two separate but equal exclamation points. Lisa's gush is more about the circumstances than it is about me— the house and the food are her orgasms. But the circumstances, tweaked away from our normal ones, add an edge of novelty and giddiness. What Lisa really wants is to get married, to make this situation permanent. Her best tactic (she thinks) is complete submission. I (as usual) don't know what I want; Lisa occupies a niche like Jena did. Because Trish is as solidly middle-class in her roots as I am, because we have shared similar experiences, Trish never completely feels the need to submit to me. Our best sex happens as a counterbalance to the routine betrayals that characterize our relationship. I am only ever an object to Lisa, despite her subservience; the fold-out bed, clean sheets, and wall-to-wall carpeting are bracketed into her equation of who I am. Solid material roots are what she wants the most in her.

#47

Oddly, Jena reacts against my middle-class roots, as if they are distasteful or deceitfully earned. Jena is demure and polite with my family; but there is an edge of defensiveness to her reactions. She shuts down rather than opening up, as Lisa does. When we sneak off to my bedroom to make love, Jena takes it as a welcome break and respite to duties and obligations she cannot, and will not, fulfill. She is proud of her family's nobility and simplicity; her ambitions involve maintenance of who she is, rather than a climb towards a new self, via material means. The truth, however, is that my family is far more friendly to Jena than her family is to me. Jena's family demonstrates no consonance with the arts; minimal conversational skills; insipid tastes; and the same edge of defensiveness that Jena has. So in-law miseries immediately begin to impinge on our little marriage. The only way Jena and I seem to work is alone; we thrive when marooned on little desert islands. We are so genuinely moved by each other's bodies that the relevant equation is simple: touch, touch, touch. I have more extended sex with Jena than I ever have with anyone else: hours after languorous hours, so that we are lifted up over our bodies simply from having emptied them. We're too young to realize how transcendental the engagement is— you could call it just kids being kids. But at least, not having delved into the normative crusts of ambition and betrayal, we do these things with the ripeness and purity that they can only have once.

#48

Trish tells so many horror stories about her parents that they have assumed legendary status before I even meet them. They are white-collar, devout Christian WASPs; they live in a large, conventionally furnished house in Media. Because all three daughters are grown up, there's not much left to fill the house; it strikes me as being both too empty and too clean. Trish's horror stories involve alcoholism, sexual abuse, philandering, and rampant meanness; I see none of these things. But I realize, through Trish, that the WASP psyche dotes on artful evasions, permanently closed doors, and freshly scrubbed, polished surfaces. The WASP version of nice is predicated on a perpetual need for surface maintenance; for all of Trish's buffoonish antics, put a stranger in front of her and she becomes a model of propriety. As I sit down to dinner with Trish and her parents, I'm amazed at Trish's sudden transformation into dutiful daughter. There's nothing extravagant about the food, because of course these WASPs aren't going to waste their money wooing their black sheep artist daughter and her boyfriend. But the surface of the conversation remains unruffled. It is only when Trish's mother claims to be "so-so on the gays and the blacks" that a rupture occurs. She also finds time to remind us that "you can never be too rich or too thin." The problem I hear with this WASP is that she has absolutely no sense of irony. She lives straightforwardly on the surface and naively hopes that nothing else exists. She's a housewife; but her social position, she believes, is immensely elevated by her husband's funds and the God that provided them.

#49

Trish and I are both buffoons; when we see Trish's family we are often stoned. One Christmas I spend with Trish's family, I am asked to bring my guitar. I do, and the whole family sings along to old Beatles songs. Trish's sisters are as attractive as she is; Trish plays the usual competitive games sisters play. Usually, the mood isn't all that festive. Trish's parents want what most traditional WASP families want for their daughters; to have her marry into money, so that she might be off their hands. As I realize this quite consciously, and know that in this family's eyes I'm no less a failure and a flush than their daughter is, it's interesting to feel a sense of almost-acceptance at these dinners. That my roots are unclean tilts things even more formidably against me; but I enjoy the education I'm receiving nonetheless. I learn, for the first time, the absurdity of middle-class, church-going, white-bread America— folks that vote Republican as a matter of course, elevate themselves by considering their brand of normalcy the only Godly one, and don't need to rationalize the way that Catholics and Jews do, because they have no guilt or shame to begin with.

#50

I learn from Trish the rules of intoxication. As you lift off, you leave behind everything in your consciousness that is tinged towards the mundane. Normal space/time dimensions need not apply; everything happens in a realm of perfected imbalance, expected surprise. Trish has lived with drug dealers; has spent years in circumstances extreme enough that ingesting hard chemicals becomes like brushing one's teeth. Trish does, in fact, find states of intoxication cleaner than sobriety. A sober mind dwells on hard facts; hard facts for Trish have no endurance. Trish wants every lover to be Lord Byron; every night to contain and perpetuate Greek-level dramas; and to be a heroine in such a world grants a crown of flame, of radiance, that Trish covets. But dramas demand conflicts; I learn that Trish will rock the boat for no other reason than this. There's always a solution sweet; but Trish enjoys the solution less than the problem. She wants to see me riled; there's always an impressive array of red flags at her disposal. When she does her seven-veiled dances, she can use her various highs to create a palpable ethereality. I never have any choice (once the drama has been set in motion) but to resolve the tension with a push into her, and a denouement involving another bowl, drink, pill. Consummate sensuality can have no reasonable end; it has to be pushed to its limits to be really tasted. This equation threatens to overtake my existence. They are a distraction from a shrewish reality— that the greatest escapists invariably have the most onerous obstacles and daunting responsibilities to escape from.

#51

To be a young artist in the aughts in America— what could be a more daunting task? It's this Trish and I are escaping from; the sense that we are both fighting a tremendously uphill battle. We cower behind our years— we're young, in our mid-twenties, and we're not (necessarily) supposed to have scaled any mountains yet. We cower behind our dreams, our ideals; behind the inebriated joy of our bodies; and behind the consonance we have with dead masters. We train ourselves not to look at the odds, because the odds are against us. Yet we take for granted our own genius and the eventual dispersion of the world's riches at our feet. How seriously are we taken? We dismiss commentary from unenlightened sources which, if seriously considered, cuts off genius. How we separate is over discipline. My work ethic demands daily performance and permanent obeisance; Trish spaces things out so that many of her days are untouched by the rigors of creation. I drive hard at certain goals; Trish wavers between obeisance to her self-destructive impulses and her creative instincts. The net result of this contradiction is that she often has less to show for her efforts than I do. But we live in a time in which such distinctions are often unapparent; and I am more invested in Trish's eventual success than she is in mine. Her selfishness assumes too much— not just superior genius, but the laxity it can endow genius with. Assured of her future glory, she can intoxicate herself without due restraint. The darkness I sense in us manifests as an intuition that realities (especially political) are being ignored— that we are living irresponsible lives.

#52

How Trish and I most go up is through words. Sometimes when we talk (often late at night, and when our bodies have spent themselves) we reach an elevated state of understanding; a sense of having transcended the shackles of normal consciousness. This is true intoxication, and cuts into us more (and with greater rapidity, satisfaction) than drugs do. We read through Donne's "The Ecstasy" and then bear it out in performative terms— eyes interlocked, extremities touching. We are both classicists and the notion of aligning ourselves with age-old wisdom arouses us. In our shared mythology, the American landscape does not exist— we do our dances with and obeisance to Albion, and our purer roots attach us to English thoughts, objects, senses of art's victory over materiality, war, and history. Trish has other dwelling spots— Renaissance Italy fascinates her. The humanism she espouses is Renaissance humanism; the nobility and expressiveness of the human form, its many contours and lights. As the years wear on, I realize that Trish is stuck in the mode of replication. She wants to compress the Renaissance into the twenty-first century. I leave the nineteenth century behind and initiate a quest for a contemporary muse, one that integrates rather than replicates. But our shared voyage through four or five centuries of high art is our greatest and most lasting shared accomplishment.

#53

Most of my key scenes with Trish play themselves out in West Philadelphia. It is a blasted landscape—filthy, litter-strewn streets, crime, poverty. But there is a pleasing rustic aspect to many of the houses; early twentieth-century built, ivy strewn. By the time we are in our thirties, Trish lives in an apartment building on 49th off of Baltimore. The roof is slanted, paved in black-top; and there is a fire escape attached to Trish's apartment where we can loaf. We still smoke pot in bits; we have maintained our physical relationship. Trish is bored; she wants some of the old drama back. As summer wears on, Trish comes to the conclusion that the finest tactic in her arsenal, where the reinvigoration of our relationship is concerned, is to break it off. She is assured that I will pursue her again with renewed passion. Meanwhile, the country has sunk into a collective depression. The cost of living skyrockets; people begin to use their credit cards for every purchase. My first books come out and are well-received; but poetry is a limited context, and the buffoonery of the Philly poetry scene is unsurpassed. All in all, this is a time of malaise and discontent; a time in which artists generally do not feel treasured or even valued. The national malaise is seeping into personal dramas; Trish and I are no exception.

#54

Lisa has dramatic moments; however, unlike Trish, she is unable to make them stick. Trish is able to make her dramas go up— they incorporate myth, history, and the ineluctable nature of hostile circumstances. Lisa is crass, and when she has panic attacks, they cause discomfort that rivets negative attention on her vulgarity. Moreover, I am looking for a way out, an ostensible reason to pursue Trish over Lisa. I learn for the second time that physical sparks lose their luster over long periods of time— things get stale, and the movements, gestures, and contours that were once enticing become repulsive. I see that Lisa and I have mostly a relationship of convenience, a kind of sham marriage— what never coalesces seems more important than what does. People become habits to each other and spend vast amounts of time (months, years, decades, life-times) in sham relationships just to create the impression of being loved, of belonging somewhere. That real love never enters the equation is an irrelevant issue to them. What is real love? Real love is something Trish and I learn about— a shared movement upwards, a companionship towards higher realities, an unwillingness to deny that stasis is a dominant factor in the human world.

#55

Yet, I was later to learn, I didn't lose nothing when I lost Lisa. Simplicity I could never get from Trish, or Jena. Lisa at her best could make something elegant from simplicity— rituals honed and refined, pleasing repetitions. Our courtly, considerate bedroom routines had a way of haunting me when I later realized I would have to live, with many people and in many contexts, with inconsideration. Even her ordinary appearance remained arousing to me; combined with an acknowledgement that my departure from her life had been both disruptive and abusive to her. Lisa's own magnetism guaranteed that there were soon other men in her life; my absorption in Trish meant that I didn't notice much. We were reduced to a position of making no dramatic gestures to each other. For the last months I spent in her presence, she continued to visibly spite Trish and more or less ignore me; I had no reason to disrespect her. In my leaving our marriage, and bothering to cheat into another one, I lost a kind of virginity. Now, with Trish, I entered into a marriage conceived in a context which involved treachery. I was no longer innocent. Trish carried with her a disdain for innocence anyway; as did Tob; with a heavy overlay not only of what she'd done in sex and relationships, but of what she'd done (like Tob) to get drugs. I avidly bought weed then, and was always holding, an incentive (I noticed) for Trish and Tob to stay with me. That part of their lives— how to procure drugs for themselves— guaranteed that things could never be simple for them. Lisa could take or leave pot, and the rest of it. No artistic compulsion pushed her into an abrasive, tumultuous ring. Thus, Lisa had a strong foundation towards retaining both innocence and the capacity for simplicity. Trish and Tob had addictions which forced them, and me with them, to live on a knife-edge.

#56

Jena has very specific, very naïve notions about love. Love is faith— you believe in someone else. But Jena's version of love presupposes a static sense of self, and an equally static sense of the Other. If you change, you must not change profoundly— there must be a continuous, coherent presence that subsists from one change to another. The conflict is that most mutual upwards movements change things (consciousness, emotional matter) irreparably. As soon as it becomes clear that this is what Jena's vision is (once the initial thrill of perpetual physical intercourse has subsided), I realize that nothing between us can coalesce. She barbs her remarks in such a way as to suggest that I'm not who she believed me to be— a simple, unchanging soul. As things burn down to the wire, I realize that Jena's ideals dictate that no one will ever exist for her except as a shadow of these ideals. She will project her ideals onto many, and see who mostly closely conforms to their striations. When I read through her letters many years later, I am stunned that I could've fooled her for as long as I did. But there's not much room for reality in human relationships and by the time I reread these letters, I have my own formulated ideals. What redeems me, in my own estimation, is the facticity of my awareness— that the idea of an actualized human ideal is fallacious, and that honesty consonance on this level has its own way of going up.

#57

With all her very real purity, innocence, and receptivity, Jena has to fade. The reasons are amorphous, and I'm confused because the culture Jena comes out of is both alien and hostile to me. It will take me twenty years to even divine what the thoughts on the surface of Jena's mind are, why she's awash in stress. Across the hall from her room in Leete Hall is Cara, who I meet elsewhere, am stunned to realize is placed where she is. Cara is raven-haired, small-busted, blue-eyed, taller than average though not as tall as Jena, pretty but bruised looking. She has perpetual bags under her eyes. She is from the same background Jena is, but has more of a hinge to being a brain in the world. Her emotions fasten closely to what grades she's receiving semester to semester in her classes. Cara offers her room as an alternate place to hang out now that Jena and I are fighting. I am too young to understand how rivalries between pretty girls from small towns go, and how I am being used as a pawn in a power game Cara is playing. Yet Cara has a sense of waste and being wasted about her life, and an appearance of being exquisitely wrapped up in secret difficulties. I find her difficult to decipher. When Jena and I formally end in October, I find it difficult not to wonder if I can just jump, as it were, into Cara, and start something new. My equation is extreme confusion in all directions. The two small town beauties know what the score is more than me. Yet the rules and regulations of their upbringings mean that silence must be on the menu in my direction.

#58

When Jena and I officially break-up, I'm left with confusion, perplexity, and a sense of being powerless. But there's a semester on, classes to go to, papers to write, and I continue writing creatively on the side. It's easy to smush into whatever with Cara, who also works at the North Halls Dining Commons with me, because the deeper levels of toppling a marriage are not ones I'm prepared to confront or assimilate yet. After several weeks of hanging out, marked by Cara's teasing games (there are guys she grew up with and who she's still attached to not far from State College), I finally bust through her reverses one night, and we make love. It's to the point, fast, and over. It hits me in the guts that that's it. We'd now both achieved our goal. In another words, another marriage, after my marriage to Jena, will not follow hard on the heels of it. When I realize that the physical relationship is to be that brief, I enter into more confusion. Now, the equation has changed into a kind of hyper-cringe. There's something at hand, that Cara and Jena both know more than me about, and I'm being kept in the dark. Jena has disappeared completely. There's no sign of her in Leete Hall or anywhere else. Cara withdraws at least part of the way into a shell. The momentum of the semester pushes me forward, but part of me is flip-flopping, in a stagnant fashion, a fish out of water, trying to reconcile the surface of my life with what's in the depths. After all these years, Cara's equation is still a mystery to me; what she was doing there, in Leete Hall, to me and to Jena. And if, for some reason, anyone sent her. The further, important equation to understand is that relationships and relationship equations do not and cannot happen in a vacuum. The human world is only too happy to take the organicism of purity equations like the ones I had with Jena and force them to compromise themselves into fakeries, or ambiguities, or both.

II. Antithesis

#59

Here's the complicated equation: if there isn't much reality in human relationships, but you have to have them, you must embrace the responsibility of making them as realistic as possible. There can be no *I am just this, you are just that*: the realistic approach is one that fastens and binds to nothing. Jade will be over in a few hours and, as I prepare myself, I realize that to not-fasten leaves one perpetually unequipped. But somehow it doesn't matter- the clench of dissolution is so sweet that no one ever recovers from it. This clench has its own transcendental reality, and if what dissolution really is remains permanently out of our grasp, authoritative judgments must be suspended. Jade is smallish, about 5'2, with long, straight brown hair that falls down her back, delicate Virgo features, and a mien brought to level pitch by many wounds. When we make love, I am forced to be gentler— gone are the thrashings and poundings, and I find myself in a new position, playing a new role. Jade is an actress, and every gesture she makes is nuanced, deliberate, complex.

#60

Jade keeps pulling surprises. I'm stunned because she does this with a certain amount of levity, as though anything that startles goes up. The drugs she ingests take her to a realm of crystallized perfection, in which she cuts through open spaces like a human blade. Because I am willing to follow her, she initiates me into the mysteries of this realm. I find that my edge is blunted, because in many ways it is a false edge— artificially produced, unstable, past any form of measurement. Nevertheless, when we meet in the middle our edges coalesce. Alright, so this is artificial, she says; what and who gets to define the natural? Can you even tell me what the natural is? I admit that I can't, and this admission transpires at a moment of maximum vulnerability for both of us. Are we razors or mirrors? Jade inhabits a world of hollow forms, which she hovers above— my role in her life is to contradict her thesis, that we might create a dialectic. As we move towards synthesis, Jade places one of her hands on my face, puts her forehead to mine. She knows that there is a sting in her hollowness for me, who would prefer to see fullness. But we go on like this for hours without knowing what or who we are. The depth of this place eats into my eyes, but (as Jade is learning) I enjoy being eaten— chewed, swallowed, digested.

#61

I walk around my apartment, bottoming out. I'm not hungry enough to eat, too tired to sleep. Because right now I'm seeing *through* things, I know that Jade's entry into my life isn't such a big deal. She actively courts states of impermanence; everything she does is calculated not to last. All her relationships are posited along an axis of attraction/repulsion. But I have inherited enough of her hollowness that right now it doesn't matter. I gaze out the window at the SEPTA trains, wires, 30th Street Station off in the distance; I remember the eternal charm of action, movement, dynamism. When you get in a train, you transcend an entire life you leave behind. Yet every human life has to balance stasis and movement. It's something Trish never mastered— how to move and not move simultaneously. Trish demands absolutes— absolute movements, absolute stillness. I have learned that the only absolute in the universe is existence itself— something will always exist. I don't pretend to know how, or what, or why. I've left all the shot-glasses out; Jade forgot her cigarettes, American Spirits. I fish one out of her pack and light it.

#62

Jade, like Trish, likes to zap me with past lovers. Brian, at one point, was a music industry bigwig whose appetites led him into lethargy and destitution. Jade learned all the cocaine tricks she knows from Brian— sleep quotients, food quotients, how much to buy and when. The thing that irks me about Brian is that she speaks in doting terms of all his failures— the lechery that sapped his energy, the laziness that assumed too much. Jade's reverse mountain psychology has strange quirks— she only dotes on failures that have as their backdrop absolute material success. She loves the rags to riches to (almost) rags scenario, but she notices (and this is the crucial bit to her) Brian is cared for. He won't starve, struggle, or implode— his material life is secure. Jade loves that for all the motions and maneuvers that have defined Brian's existence, he's pretty much the same guy he's always been. That interior sameness is something I don't particularly understand— how a human being can develop this sort of negative integrity, and maintain it over long periods of time. But I notice that Jade really does change, and is often stymied by her own alterations. Each new role to play effaces the last; and how many roles can one be compelled to play in one's life time? Jade, like me, bears the burden of absolute sensitivity— everything lost or gained creates a new mark on an already over-marked consciousness. If Jade has a hard time doting on me, it's only because I show her a mirror image as warped, deceptive, and evanescent as the one you see in a circus mirror, that may or may not be moving towards a new height or depth.

#63

I have the challenge set out before me: to accept my own hollowness, as I watch Jade perform her daily tasks. There is a sense that I am watching a series of multiplications: first Jade is *this* person, then *that* person. All of this signifies that Jade sees my own multiplications when we touch. But if there is no stable center inhering in either of us, who are the two people that fuse their physical energies, in such a way that the world is briefly effaced? Multiplications can be taken two ways— as a destruction of stable centers, or the creation of variegated parts that form coherent wholes. Because Jade needs her drugs more than I do, I feel her desperate edge of a woman hovering above an abyss, a woman who cannot look down. I'm past the point of believing in myself as savior or personal Jesus; Jade must live with her crosses and bang through them on her own. My own cross is the vision of multiplications ending, simply because each ephemeral self expresses the same desires, tastes, fixations, and foibles. Jade and I can't give each other that much— Trish could never teach me this, because our basic, shared presumption was that nothing existed but what we could give each other. As I make love to Jade, there is a charity I feel towards her predicated on her own unacknowledged autonomy— that she has more than she thinks she has. If we persist without knowing yet what our equation is, I know that much of it has to do with shared charity, expressed in a context of basic and final separation and singularity.

#64

One night, just for amusement, I showed Jade all my mementos of Trish. I have stills of all of Trish's early pictures; shots taken of us on vacation in Montreal (us in the botanical gardens, looking like hippies with Chinese lanterns us); notes Trish wrote to me at different times; and the shirts Trish bought me as birthday gifts. It was funny to watch Jade's reaction; she sees in Trish a vast amount of frost, a frigidity that sullies her beauty. How did I stay with a frigid woman for so long? Maybe it's because I enjoying crashing through ice; maybe I'm a masochist. But it's amusing to me that I never completely acknowledged Trish's frigidity. Perhaps I thought she could be thawed over time. I get a sense in all this of how myths are created and passed along. Is myth the final equation for the human race? Is that the only way information can be passed along? We live in our pasts, we live with the myths that have shaped us, and if there is a place for truth in myths, it is a self-created truth that can hone and separate. In truly lived moments, myths are moot— they are established afterwards to amplify and consolidate these moments. It seems to me that Jade and I are deliberately evading the mythical in our mating— there's nothing to hold, nothing to latch onto. It's just that the persistent ache in our bodies needs to be assuaged; whatever remains of our souls hovers around us uncertainly.

#65

Some nights I have strange dreams. Vague situations play themselves out in such a way that I'm never entirely sure what happens. Faces drift around me; I identify a girl I used to know, who drifts back into the wilderness; then I see and hear Lisa. I'm watching, from a second-story window, as she plays some kind of game with a small child (to be honest, I don't know where Lisa is these days, she might even have kids). Here voice narrates to me what it was like to be my lover in the old days. I never realized how young she felt, how ill at ease she was with me then. She now excuses herself for her transgressions (and I was certainly one of her transgressions), pleading extreme youth. I was never a secure choice— too much art, too little money. But, as ever, Lisa fails to compel me, and I sense the vulnerability behind her narration— her need, not just to be like everyone else, but to be more like everyone else than everyone else is. I wake up alone, raise the blinds on my windows, and ruminate. I have chosen to live as an artist because I see vast possibilities for truth and dignity in words. Security has always seemed to me to be an unlikely condition for humans and humanity. That could be the reason I'm always willing to fall in love— if you can achieve security within insecurity, you can live with risks, contingencies, separations, anxieties, all the numerals that accrue to our equations. If the relevant numerals accrue to bank-books, stasis will always remain the rule.

#66

With Jade, I'm beginning to feel these gushes that I can only call love. I'm so overwhelmed by the intensity of the feeling that I transcend my desire to have her physically. It is just because I realize now that Jade actually has nice thoughts of me, nice dreams of me, and actively encourages my happiness. I have come to the startling realization that 90% of Trish's thoughts about me were negative. She hated my art, my discipline, my dedication to creating at a high level; loathed my physical neediness, the way my body took from hers; and would now be happier if I were dead, safely embalmed in my own myths. Jade is too good-natured to fall into these traps; she's mastering her solitude, severing her ties to a society that wants to cast her in a bogus mold, and planting seeds of triumph. It is with my help and guidance that she is doing this, and she is doing the same for me. The equation for us is something up above our heads, some other world, realms of spirit uncontaminated by pettiness, unclouded by fear, untarnished by envy. All the same, I don't entirely trust these gushes; could it just be that I've led a life so enclosed in negativity that I've never really known what love is? At my first brief encounter with genuine love, all my reserves of heart-energy spill out of me harum-scarum, and it is far more satisfying than a sexual climax. The upshot of this is that I feel, for the first time, a sense of impatience with physical consummations; what I want is to bring the worlds, the two gushes, together, in such a way that I can create, with Jade, truly lived moments that take on consonance as true myths.

#67

The quandary is this: as high up as I fly with Jade, when she leaves I hit a rock bottom base of depression and lethargy. No human being can soar without sinking; no consciousness can be wholly vertical. But as I lurch around, looking for something to occupy my time, I get irritable fits; vertigo replaced by claustrophobia. My nerves are strung to such a pitch that each movement my body performs engenders an ache. This, then, is the terrible clay we are made of; and the incorrigible processes of change wear it down with precise and unyielding force. Yet I feel I can master this; the thought rises that the self-begotten equations of solitude have a brutal finality to them that relationship equations don't— we die alone. Every lover gives us the armor of having been loved; stripped of it, we build our own fortresses against the tide of everything that is not us. The question is whether the armor we gain from having been loved can be used when we are alone; I think it can. But it has to be tweaked so that the different and separate selves we have been become lucid in our minds. As I watch the sun set over Arch Street, what use to seem a fabulously ugly view to me now seems apropos, adequate. The human world is largely ugly; what's redemptive is the landscapes forged in solitude or near-solitude by individuals. If you want to embody this equation, it becomes necessary to embrace the geometry of states of being alone, "single," and the ability to pursue and attain different levels and grades of interiorized fusion.

#68

If you let your mind wander and hit a vertical patch, it becomes easy to see that solitude and sex presuppose each other's necessity in an examined life. I've just learned, from a reliable source, that a woman (many years back) was taken from me by slander and gossip. It was during one of my promiscuous periods; in the midst of such an epoch, one trots from flower to flower, trying to pick everything, place everyone in one's button-hole. This particular woman was forced by a social context to reject my advances. In my current solitude, I find some richness in having been deprived— it is a reminder that most social contexts are predicated upon fear, insecurity, desperation, desire, and treacherous self-interest. Now, my life has been reduced to Jade-and-I, or I alone. When I do these little phone dishes with figures from my past, I'm stunned to find how easily stung I am, how many situations I botched, people I misread. The verticality of this is all in the realization that it must happen again. No artist can afford to live for prolonged periods above the fray— there is too much in an individual consciousness that flattens out on vacuity if preserved in isolation.

III. Synthesis

#69

The crux of the matter is this: it's time for me to jump into some fray again. I'm restless: I know that what you gain in solitude has to be pushed out into the open for there to be some truth consonance, and these peregrinations are not enough. Jade has been bolstering my confidence; but I'm too old to just hit the bars and the clubs like I used to. So I'm poised to do something, I just don't know what yet. Like mathematics, human life has distinct compensations: there is always another equation to be formulated and parsed, a new slant, novel ways of perceiving realities that are leveled and layered to begin with. And, somewhere in the distance, a miracle always hovers: the promise of a few truly lived moments, in which every narcissistic schema is transcended in the sense that something is being given and received on both sides. If I didn't believe this, there would be no reason not to commit suicide, because I already feel I've done enough work for one life-time, and the growth of my seeds has been more than adequate. But because the deepest truths are social, it cannot be my life-path to give up on my own humanity, and everyone else's. I have claimed that these miracles usually transpire in a sexual context, but I have learned in writing this book that this does not have to be the case. Our greatest consonance with reality and humanity is expressed any time something moves in an upwards direction between ourselves and someone else; any equation involving legitimate ascension is one worth investigating.

Credits

and/or— 37, 41, 45

Argotist Online Poetry— 26, 27

blue & yellow dog— 15, 18, 19, 24

Great Works— 38, 39, 43, 44

Listenlight— 34

Mipoesias— 53, 55, 56

Moria— 1, 2, 17, 20

Nth Position— 54

Otoliths— 23, 28, 29, 32, 37

P.F.S. Post— 13, 14, 17

Scud— 62, 63, 64

The Jade Episodes (Equations 51-67, and including the entire Antithesis and Synthesis of the book's dialectic) is featured, in its 2021 form, and in its entirety, on PennSound.

The Thesis Episodes (Equations 1-50, and including the entire Thesis of the book's dialectic) was added to PennSound in June 2023.

Equations #60 reached #2 on the Podcasts Overall chart on Soundclick.

Cover image: portrait of Mary Evelyn Harju in West Philadelphia in 2001 (Anonymous), image treated by Adam Fieled in 2022.

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